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Bennett plan aims to fast-forward education gains

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Tony Bennett, Indiana’s superintendent of public instruction, filed his “Fast Forward” plan last week with the U.S. Department of Education. The application seeks $500 million for Indiana public schools. Having read
the full 568-page report, I expect the federal government to fund the plan. It will put Indiana’s public schools light years ahead of other schools in many other states.

The strategy behind Fast Forward is to empower schools to take bold action, to give schools the tools and support they need to achieve academic success for their students and to hold schools accountable.

This strategy involves four major areas of reform:

- Moving to Common Core standards and assessments with other states in consortium with Indiana.

- Developing high-tech, sophisticated data systems for not only K-12 but also universities to allow tracking of student, teacher and school success throughout and after a student’s academic career.

- Developing great teachers and great school leaders and giving them the full authority to practice their profession and use independent judgment while allowing them to be creative and innovative, all without local political interference.

- Holding teachers and school leaders accountable for their performance by adding new strict accountability provisions that include a variety of strategies for turning around low-achieving schools.

Fast Forward is going to produce far greater reform than that claimed by the ill-advised No Child Left Behind Act. Educators will finally obtain the control and authority over their profession to produce the results the public demands. The Fast Forward plan will elevate the profession of teaching. More importantly, it helps retain the outstanding teachers Indiana desperately needs to educate Indiana’s students.

But the plan will certainly cause anxiety among educators. It changes the culture of public education by holding teachers, school leaders and schools responsible for student achievement. Those who don’t measure up to the high standards set by the plan will lose their employment. The state can shut down entire school districts and transfer the management authority to other organizations.

Teachers and school leaders will not only be evaluated on the basis of student achievement and growth but their compensation will also reflect the academic success of their students. And teachers in hard-to-find subject areas will also find more opportunities for growth and increased compensation. There will be many opportunities for professional development for all teachers.

Perhaps the single most important part of the plan is the mandate that schools with high poverty and high numbers of minority students must have access to qualified teachers and school leaders.

All of these reforms will cause angst for many educators. Despite the excitement of many of these reforms, let’s not forget the personal toll it will place on many teachers and principals. The plan needs to be implemented in the most humane manner.

Also, one item most notably absent is a discussion about the third leg of the accountability tripod. One leg of the tripod is the educational policymakers, i.e., Congress, state legislatures, state boards of education, state
departments and so on. The second leg is the school staff, particularly teachers and school leaders. That third leg is students and their parents.

These reforms, if they are to take full effect, must allow teachers and school leaders to insist on accountability from students and their parents. This will likely prove unpopular with some parents. Indiana’s schools, however, will be at a distinct disadvantage in their efforts of school reform unless and until educational policymakers give the authority to teachers and school leaders to require accountability from students and parents. Without the third leg on the accountability tripod, it will collapse into a heap of rubble, a graveyard of earlier school reforms.

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